

# **Student Engagement and the Impact on Employability: A Creative Contribution of Competence-Based Assessment in Malaysian Secondary Schools**

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## **Introduction**

Malaysia is working its way up to becoming a distinctive developed nation with its own identity and characteristics by the year 2020. Education is thus given the emphasis to nurture intellectual learning society that will contribute to the realisation of the vision. Ministry of Education, Malaysia has taken the initiative to introduce 22 vocational subjects in secondary schools in stages since 2002. The purpose is to provide opportunity to the technical and vocational inclined upper secondary school students (Form 4 and Form 5) to develop their knowledge, skills and attitude towards becoming contributors to nation building. Competence-based assessment (CBA) was then implemented for all the 22 vocational subjects by Malaysia Examinations Syndicate (MES) to prepare and equip the students with necessary and relevant competencies and capabilities to meet the challenges and demands of employability in the era of k-economy (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, 2002). This paper presents one of the outcomes of an on-going study conducted by the author on the impact of CBA on secondary school students' employability. The findings of this study could be used to inform various government bodies and training agencies, and could also be an influence to policy-making on education particularly the assessment initiatives and practices.

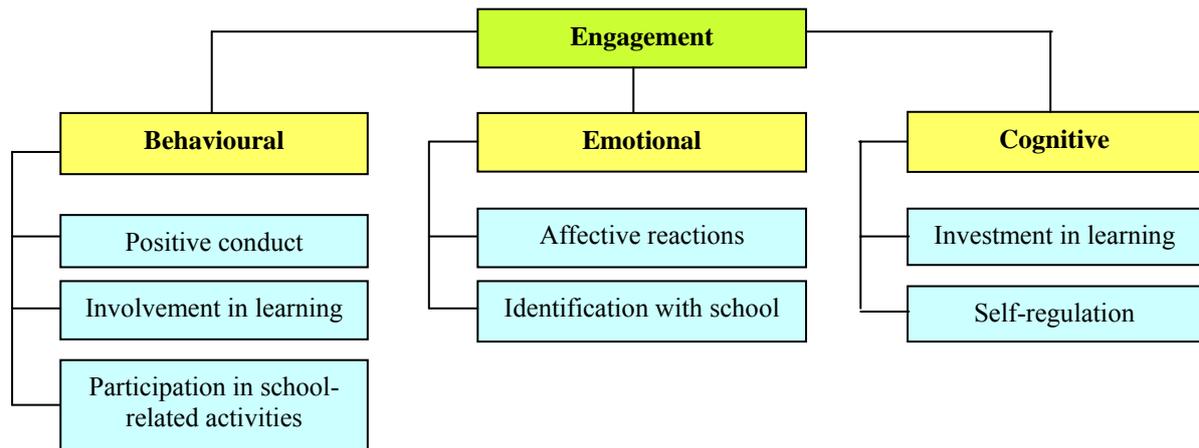
## **Background of the Study**

Basic Interior Decorations (BID) is one of the newest elective subjects offered to the upper secondary school students aged 16-18 years. It was first implemented in Malaysian secondary schools in 2004. CBA has been the form of assessment applied to BID by MES. After a few years of implementation, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of CBA in order to ensure that it serves the purpose it is designed for and it is able to equip students with relevant employability skills. Tanner (1997) suggested that how well one will be able to apply competence attained and acquired in CBA outside the assessment environment needs to be studied and explained. This is because CBA is of questionable value if the emphasis on continued demonstration of competence is ignored. Thus, the aim of the study is to determine the effectiveness of CBA of BID in Malaysian secondary schools in preparing students with adequate and relevant employability skills. In this study, competence is the fundamental constituent of employability, and it is characterised in terms of the constructive interactions between knowledge and skills which constitute the operational engagement. Attaining coherence between the outcomes of CBA in the classroom and the demands of the labour market has been argued (Bowden & Masters, 1993). This paper focuses on student engagement as one of the outcomes of CBA that could be of significance in students' future endeavour by addressing the following research questions;

- How can we describe student engagement in the context of CBA of BID?
- What is the impact of student engagement on students' employability?

## Student Engagement

Student engagement is defined by researchers as students' attitudes towards and perceptions of schooling as well as their participation in school activities (OECD, 2004). Student engagement is considered an important outcome of schooling and a predictor of achievement (Russell *et al.*, 2007) as it is seen to increase students' motivation in learning which at the same time reduces the feelings of being alienated and disaffected from school (Russell *et al.*, 2005; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Student engagement is multifaceted in nature and this section defines it in three ways; behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004) as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Elements of Student Engagement**

(Adapted from: Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Finn *et al.*, 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

School engagement has been predominantly measured by observable behaviours directly related to academic effort and achievement (Sinclair *et al.*, 1998) and thus making it likely to be affected by what happens in relationships with teachers and peers, and by school experiences (Russell *et al.*, 2005). There are three different components of behavioural engagement; positive conduct, involvement in learning and academic tasks, and participation in school-related activities (Cunningham *et al.*, 2006; Fletcher, 2006; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Positive conduct consists of students' willingness to follow the rules and adhere to classroom norms as well as to avoid any misbehaviour in school. Next is students' involvement in learning and academic tasks which include behaviours such as effort, persistence, attention, concentration and class participation (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Finn *et al.*, 1995; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The third is students' participation in school-related activities such as athletics, school governance (Russell *et al.*, 2006) and extra-curricular activities.

Emotional engagement includes students' affective reactions in the classroom (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and their identification with school (Finn *et al.*, 1995). Students' affective reactions in the classroom refer to their interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Students' identification with school refers to their sense of belonging or the feeling of being important to the school as well as the value or appreciation of success in school-related outcomes (Finn *et al.*, 1995). This strong sense of belonging to the school is developed through good relationships with the school environment, teachers and peers (Russell *et al.*,

2006; Wentzel, 1998). Students' value or appreciation of success in school-related outcomes relates to how proud they feel of their school accomplishments in any occasions.

Cognitive engagement entails the inner qualities such as self-regulation and psychological investment in learning (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Self-regulation involves students' use of metacognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate their cognition when accomplishing tasks (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). The investment in learning includes the desire to take up a challenging task that is beyond the requirements (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Newmann *et al.*, 1992; Wehlage *et al.*, 1989) such as preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure (Connell & Wellborn, 1991).

Engagement has been found to be a complex and multifaceted construct. Its elements interact with each other in non-trivial ways, although the casual observer might not be able to identify an observed behaviour with clear purpose on the part of the individual. Nevertheless, engagement in learning is considered to be the mechanism for competence-promoting behaviour (Russell *et al.*, 2005). This is to say that students have to be engaged actively with their learning in order to achieve desired outcomes. The relationship between competence (the underlying ideal to which we aspire for ourselves and for our students when we are teachers) and engagement (the enactment of intentional behaviour) is an important one. The competence-engagement relationship is fundamental and offers a more helpful conceptualisation of how to enable learning. This prevailing relationship is essential in establishing competence-based assessment of BID as the measures to equip BID students in Malaysian secondary schools with the necessary employability skills.

## **The Study**

This study employed a concurrent embedded mixed-method approach across all the 19 schools in the country offering the subject of BID. The data collection methods included surveys, interviews, observation and portfolio reviews. The instruments utilised in the surveys were the Student's Questionnaire and Assessor's Questionnaire while Teacher's Interview Protocol and Student's Interview Protocol were used in the interviews. A Behaviour Observational Form was used during the observation of students' hands-on BID practical tasks. The questionnaires and the interview protocols were translated into the Malay language and they were then back-translated into English. The behaviour observation form was only developed in English for the researcher's use.

## **Recruitment of Participants**

The Form 5 students who were in their final year of compulsory education were the first group of participants. They were the fourth cohort of students taking BID as an elective subject for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) examination. The second group of participants were the BID teachers who had been teaching and assessing the Form 5 students. All except for one Form 5 BID teachers had attended the assessors training programme conducted by the Malaysia Examinations Syndicate (MES) and had received the first hand input on how to use the BID assessment modules in assessing students' performances. These two groups of participants were recruited through their schools by telephone and electronic email in early 2008.

## Surveys

After taking all the necessary steps, 320 out of a total of 356 students completed and returned the questionnaires, which gave a response rate of 89.9% and all targeted 19 assessors completed their questionnaires with 228 matching students. Both the questionnaires were adapted from the employees' self-rating scale and the supervisor's rating scale used in the Indic@tor cross-cultural study on the measurement and enhancement of employability among ICT professionals working in small and medium-sized companies (The Indic@tor Consortium, 2005).

The Student's Questionnaire was designed to investigate various factors that would allow us to understand the impact of competence-based assessment on students' employability in relation to the BID tasks. However, in this paper, only the dimensions of employability with 25 items and students' success scales with 6 items will be discussed. The students were asked to rate themselves against each item using a 5 point Likert scale by putting a tick (✓) in one of the columns numbered with 1 for "strongly disagree", and 5 for "strongly agree". The last section of the questionnaire included an open-ended question asking students to describe their thoughts of and feelings about the BID assessment that they had undertaken, in terms of the practical work it involved, effectiveness and relevance. Demographic information concerning students' gender and ethnicity was also collected. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the dimensions of employability and subjective success in the student's questionnaire. The KMO is .843 while the communalities range from .306 to .677.

The Assessor's Questionnaire gathered the information on the assessors' perceptions of the impact of competence-based assessment on the Form 5 students' employability. The first section asked the assessors to name twelve Form 5 students in their class and to rate each student against each item using a 5-point Likert scale by writing 1 for "strongly disagree", and 5 for "strongly agree". Generally, this section contained 31 items that are the same as the items on dimensions of employability and success scales in the Student's Questionnaire, but the items were rephrased to suit this group of participants. Descriptive analyses were conducted for both the questionnaires. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations of the scales in the dimensions of employability in both the questionnaires.

**Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviations of the Scales in the Dimensions of Employability in Student's Questionnaire and Assessor's Questionnaire**

Dimensions of Employability	Student's Questionnaire		Assessor's Questionnaire	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Organisation Sense	4.16	0.358	4.08	0.463
Personal Flexibility	4.10	0.347	4.10	0.413
Affective Reactions	4.01	0.625	4.61	0.456
Anticipation & Optimisation	3.98	0.413	3.98	0.392
Occupational Expertise	4.05	0.393	4.00	0.538

The internal consistency Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scales developed from the study for the Student's Questionnaire and the Assessor's Questionnaire ranged from 0.593 to 0.872 as shown in Table 2. Most of the alpha values in both the questionnaires exceeded

the acceptable value of 0.70 for the scales to be considered reliable (Schmitt, 1996). The remaining alpha values in the questionnaires fell below the minimum acceptable alpha coefficient but they could still be accepted for research use as the alpha values were above 0.60 (Hui & Lee, 2000; Pierce, *et al.*, 1993).

**Table 2: Cronbach’s Alpha of the Scales in Student’s Questionnaire and Assessor’s Questionnaire**

Scale	Student’s Questionnaire		Assessor’s Questionnaire	
	Alpha Values	No. of items	Alpha Values	No. of items
<b><i>Dimensions of employability</i></b>				
- Organisation sense	0.745	6	0.776	6
- Personal flexibility	0.736	5	0.671	5
- Affective reactions	0.768	4	0.819	4
- Anticipation and optimisation	0.724	6	0.600	6
- Occupational expertise	0.646	4	0.690	4
<b><i>Success</i></b>				
Subjective	0.651	4	0.709	4
Objective	0.775	2	0.864	2

## Interviews

One-to-one interviews were conducted with both the students and teachers using Malay language to facilitate interviewees’ understanding and responses. All the 19 teachers took part in the interview while four students from each school were randomly selected, giving a total of 76 students. The Student’s Interview Protocol was used to gather information on: students’ involvement in other BID-related activities; their perceptions of the BID assessment modules in preparing them for future employment; and their suggestions on how they could improve their knowledge and skills in BID. Similarly, the Assessor’s Interview Protocol was used to obtain qualitative data on teachers’ perceptions of their roles in providing essential BID-related activities, the BID assessment modules pertinent to preparing students for future employment, and their suggestions on other forms of assessments that could equip students with the required employability skills.

## Observation

The Behaviour Observation Form was used to gather data on student behavioural engagement; positive conduct and involvement in learning and academic tasks (Cunningham *et al.*, 2006; Fletcher, 2006; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). The list of behaviours on positive conduct derived mostly from the workplace management list provided in the BID assessment modules which students had to abide by in every BID task. There were three tables for three different phases in the observation: the beginning of the lesson, middle of lesson and the ending of lesson. Each table had the same list of students’ behaviour to be observed and ten columns to

record a numeric code for each student under observation. A key on how to record the observations was provided at the bottom of the first page. For the first three behaviours listed in each table, the researcher had to record the number of occurrences that took place within a sixty second observation window. For the remaining six behaviours, which were also conducted on a 60-second window, the researcher had to use a rating scale from 1 to 3 (1 = not at all or very little, 2 = some or moderate, and 3 = a great deal). On the whole, the researcher observed 93 students performing eleven different BID tasks in ten schools.

### **Portfolio Review**

The researcher reviewed randomly selected students' BID portfolios by focusing on students' comments on their own performances in every accomplished BID assessment module. These comments were basically students' self-evaluations of how they felt about doing the tasks, their strengths and weaknesses in carrying out the BID tasks, the improvements to be made in the future and also their opinions on the tasks in general. These comments reflected student cognitive engagement; one of the elements of self-regulation (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). The researcher went through and recorded the comments written by 190 students on every accomplished BID modules.

### **Discussion and Findings**

Analyses of data from both the questionnaires illustrate how students and teachers perceived CBA of BID as having influences on the development of student engagement. Two of three elements of student engagement have significant impact on their employability. They are the cognitive engagement that was elicited from the anticipation and optimisation scale and the emotional engagement that was obtained from the affective reactions scale. The behavioural engagement that was elicited from organisation sense scale however, does not have significant impact on employability.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of five dimensions of employability (organisation sense, personal flexibility, affective reactions, anticipation and optimisation, and occupational expertise) to predict student's objective success (as perceived by students themselves), after controlling for the predictors (individual, job-related and organisational), and the influence of school location, students' gender and ethnicity. In order to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity, preliminary analyses were conducted. The results of this analysis indicated that the five dimensions of employability accounted for a significant proportion of the objective success variance after controlling for the effects of location of school, student's gender and ethnicity, and the predictors; the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 41.4%,  $F(19, 299) = 12.81, p < .001$ . The five dimensions of employability explained an additional 4.5% variance in objective success,  $R^2 \text{ change} = .045, F \text{ change}(5, 299) = 4.84, p < .001$ . In the final model, only three dimensions of employability were statistically significant, with anticipation and optimisation scale recording the highest beta value ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ), followed by occupational expertise scale ( $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ) and affective reactions scale ( $\beta = -.11, p < .01$ ). A similar analysis was used to predict student's subjective success and the five dimensions of employability indicated a significant amount of variability; 38.0% of total variance explained,  $F(19, 299) = 11.25, p < .001$ . However, only two dimensions of employability were statistically significant, with occupational expertise scale recording the higher beta ( $\beta = .15, p < .01$ ) than affective reactions scale ( $\beta = -.11, p < .05$ ).

As for the Assessor's Questionnaire, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well the dimensions of employability scales predicted students' objective success. The linear combination of dimensions of employability scales was significantly related to the students' objective success,  $F(5, 222) = 8.84, p < .001$ . The multiple correlation coefficient was .41, indicating that approximately 16.6% of the variance of students' objective success can be accounted for by the linear combination of the dimensions of employability. Two of five dimensions of employability (affective reactions, anticipation and optimisation) were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ). Another similar multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the ability of the dimensions of employability to predict students' subjective success. The linear combination of dimensions of employability scales was significantly related to the students' subjective success,  $F(5, 222) = 48.1, p < .001$ . The multiple correlation coefficient was .72, indicating that approximately 52% of the variance of students' subjective success can be accounted for by the linear combination of the dimensions of employability. Three of five dimensions of employability (personal flexibility, affective reactions, anticipation and optimisation) were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

### **Development of Emotional Engagement**

Further analysis of the open-ended question in the Student's Questionnaire shows that students have developed tremendous emotional engagement with 75.01% of them saying that they are happy to be in BID class as they do not feel stressful or tensed and they also enjoy doing the BID tasks. In addition, 60.31% of the students said that they have strong sense of belonging to BID class and they are proud of their class, work and ability to do BID tasks. They like CBA of BID very much and they are grateful to be taking BID as the elective subject for the MCE exams as they see themselves becoming more responsible, independent and confident than before. 24.74% of the students wrote in their portfolio that they feel satisfied and happy when accomplishing BID tasks. Furthermore, 57.89% of the assessors said in the interview that students show a lot of interest in CBA of BID and they take the responsibility to do the tasks seriously. Students seem to have strong belief in their ability and they show great enthusiasm in accomplishing the tasks.

### **Development of Cognitive Engagement**

According to the students, they have also developed cognitive engagement by becoming strategic and investing a lot in their learning. 19.69% of the students responded to the open-ended question and 4.21% wrote in their portfolio saying that they are motivated to improve their knowledge and skills in BID. They said in the interviews that they read books or magazines about BID, browse the internet and even watch BID-related programmes on television to get more information about BID. Some of the students even go for short trainings related to BID in the industry during school holidays and some even work part-time in BID-related industries after school. From the portfolio review, all the students could be inferred to be strategic as they planned and monitored their work by preparing proper work schedule, cost estimation and list of equipment and materials to be used before carrying out each BID task and following it through till the task is accomplished. 91.05% of the students evaluate their work and write comments in the portfolio after accomplishing each module; expressing their feelings about the tasks, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and suggesting improvements to be made. Although some of the BID tasks are difficult to do in the beginning, students said that they would keep on doing until the tasks get done satisfactorily. Students persevere and are persistent in completing the tasks regardless of how tiring and exhausting they are because they would like to see the finish products so that they could feel

satisfied with their accomplishment and feel proud of themselves. The assessors too in the interviews agreed that students have developed cognitive engagement with 42.11% of them saying that students put a lot of effort in improving themselves and 5.26% of them saying that students are strategic and some are even creative at times. Moreover, they said that students plan their work strategically, become motivated to invest in further training and become competitive to increase their knowledge and skills in BID.

### **Development of Behavioural Engagement**

From the observation conducted, students were found to have developed behavioural engagement. All the students observed positive conduct by following the health and safety rules and regulations in the workplace. Students prepared required materials and equipment for the task before they began working on it. They handled equipment and machinery competently and carried out tasks neatly to maintain cleanliness and safety at all time. Finally, they cleaned all used equipment, returned all used equipment to its proper place and cleaned up the workplace after working. Furthermore, 26.32% of the students said in the interviews that they have become well-behaved as they now have positive attitudes and values such as being more disciplined, patient, diligent and trustworthy. Similarly, the assessors believed that students' behaviours have improved tremendously from doing CBA of BID. 15.79% of the assessors said that students have become more diligent, concern and careful besides becoming tidier and neater in their work and appearance. The assessors are very happy to see that students' attendance has improved remarkably as they are keen on doing BID tasks. Students' involvement in learning is also evident in the observation conducted where students had discussion with teachers and friends and also took part in question and answer session with the teachers; 68.1% (beginning of lesson), 50.57% (middle of lesson) and 53.4% (end of lesson). 75% of the students said in the interviews and 12.19% of them responded to the open-ended question indicating that they are committed towards BID tasks as they find the tasks to be interesting and beneficial to them. They feel that they would have better prospect in the future as they have acquired necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes from CBA of BID. In the interviews, 43.42% of the students said that they would have better working opportunities, 23.68% said they would have opportunities to venture into small BID-related businesses and 35.53% said that they would have the opportunities to further trainings. In addition, 68.42% of the students said in the interviews that they participated actively in school-related activities especially in BID-related activities. They were involved in BID exhibitions at school, district and state levels at times; carried out small refurbishing projects in schools such as painting and installing wallpaper in special rooms; tiling small gazebos; decorating the school hall for certain functions and many other activities that they are proud of to be involved in. 47.37% of the assessors said in the interviews that these real life projects are beneficial to students to further enhance their knowledge and skills in BID.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented the basic ideas of student engagement used in the study, explained its elements and described their contributions to employability. Students undertaking CBA of BID have developed student engagement and this development has prepared students with adequate and necessary employability skills. This outcome of CBA of BID could be of interest to academics, assessors and professionals in developing competency standards in their respective assessments in the future. The findings could also contribute to the body of

knowledge especially in the areas of educational assessment, and vocational education and training. It could be used to determine the effectiveness of competence-based assessment of other subjects in generating skilled and semi-skilled workforce as desired by the country and which meets the demands of the labour market and industries. A future direction for the research presented here is to track the students in their future undertakings and do further investigation on issues related to employability.

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